

(U) 'Situation' in the Office? Ask Zelda! Today's Dilemma: How Can I Get My Boss to 'Ask Before You Task'?

FROM: 'Zelda,' Dispenser of Advice for SID Supervisors

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(U) Editor's note: The entire text below is UNCLASSIFIED.



Dear Zelda,

I am considered an expert in my field, yet my supervisor, who knows little about it, keeps giving me instructions that make no sense. How can I get him to ask me for input beforehand, so he'll stop making ignorant decisions?

Signed, Techie Knows Best

Dear Readers,

This week I'd like to address a few questions I've gotten (like the above) with a similar theme: managing up.

Whether you are currently a supervisor or not, learning how to manage your boss is a very useful skill to have. "Managing up" essentially means getting things done through people higher up the chain. It involves proactively creating a strong, effective, and mutually beneficial relationship with your supervisor. While many are passive about their relationship with their boss, letting the higher-up set the tone for the relationship, the most successful employees **take an active part in setting that tone and building the partnership**. The first thing you need to do is gain your boss' trust and confidence; here's how.

1. **Get to know your boss' style.** Observe how he prefers to operate and adjust your interactions with him accordingly (even if it's not *your* preferred method of operating). Is he technical or not; introverted or extroverted; detail- or big picture-oriented? Does he primarily use logic or feelings when making decisions? Note his preferred way of communicating: face to face? in writing? Does he like frequent or sporadic interaction with his subordinates? If you can't figure out the answers to these questions by observing him in action, then by all means, ask him!

Example: **Closed door policy** Are you frustrated because you never get any face time with your manager? Every time you go in to talk to him, he seems busy and can't afford you more than two minutes? Rather than dropping by his desk whenever you think of something he should know (and thus interrupting his train of thought), ask "would you like me to send you a weekly update?" and save it up for a short email detailing items of interest. This stands a better chance of getting his attention. Keep your visits short and infrequent. If he finds your input valuable, he'll ask you back more often.

2. **Understand what your boss needs/wants from you.** Find out what his expectations are and tell him yours. Ask what, specifically, you can do to help him.

3. **Keep your boss informed.** Give him advanced warning about problems. Anticipate what he might

need or want to know, but don't overwhelm him with minutiae. Actively market yourself or your organization to higher ups by letting them know what you're working on, your successes, challenges you are facing, and strengths or capabilities you possess that can be of use to them.

4. **Be dependable.** Deliver results. Helping your boss be successful will help you be successful.

Now that you've earned your boss' trust, you are in a better position to influence how issues related to your area of expertise are handled. Remember: take the initiative and work within his comfort zone. If, like "Techie" above, your boss is uninformed about the issues, clue him in! Encourage his questions and keep him informed of new developments in your area. (Don't wait to be asked.) Not only will it give him a better basis to make managerial decisions, but it will foster a dialog with you that might have him consulting you before making unwise pronouncements.

Moreover, by promoting a dialog where you both explain your positions, you may learn that there were more factors involved in his "ignorant" decision than you realized. When informed of an ill-advised decision, you could nicely and diplomatically point out some "concerns" you have over taking this route, but don't expect that your boss will immediately reverse his decision when confronted with your brilliant insights and opinions (although he may). Be prepared to make the best of it -- and lose the attitude. Think (and say), "this could work if we..."

You should regularly engage with your supervisor to explain opportunities for the organization in your area of expertise, list and discuss the pros and cons, identify solutions and alternatives, and recommend a way ahead. In this way you will become a partner in the decision-making process. Managing up is about collaboration and interdependence. Be supportive, not antagonistic, and you may be pleasantly surprised at how things start going your way.

As an alternative, you could be the voice of sanity "howling in the wilderness;" but that will only leave you feeling chilled and sore in the throat.

Edits

Note: There are lots of good books on the subject that can elaborate on how to identify and use influencing or relationship-building techniques. If you are having problems with a higher up, I highly recommend that you get one.
